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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

Volume 21 Number 4

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Tena Holkeboer: God's Bridge to the Chinese

by Hannah Boehme

The Midwest is known for its winters: short days and slippery sidewalks. Those who have lived in Michigan, for even a few seasons, become quickly acquainted with snow, especially Hollanders who experience the frequent lake-effect blizzards. It was during one of these snowstorms, on January 27, 1895, that Tena Holkeboer was born to parents Anna and David Holkeboer. In time, seven more children were added to the family, totaling a family of ten.

As a child, Holkeboer was healthy, cheerful, and loved to learn. Her sister said of Tena's early life:

"She went eagerly to school at the age of five and was an avid scholar. Even her play was mostly about school and teaching. She learned to read quickly and was a good speller, both in the English and Dutch languages... She enjoyed public speaking and various programs. She spent much time on her essays and literary work, although her work in history and mathematics was also well done."

The spiritual welfare of the eight Holkeboer children was also very important to Anna and David, who made sure that their children were brought up in a God-fearing household and belonged to the Christian Reformed Church. Holkeboer said in an autobiographical sketch found in *Missionary Monthly*:

"It is a great privilege to be born and reared in a home where God has first place—this blessing was mine. Reverence for the Creator and Sustainer of all, praise to His glorious Name, assurance of His love and care—these were part of life itself as an individual. I thank God for parents who caused the spirit of Christ to permeate every phase of family life."



Holkeboer attended a Christian school for the majority of her time in elementary school and moved on to Hope Preparatory School for high school. It was there that she truly became acquainted with the Reformed Church and grew to love the spirit of the church as a whole. She began to feel God directing her to the mission field, specifically foreign missions.

Upon graduation from Hope Preparatory School, Holkeboer began teaching in the Holland Christian School—primarily sixth grade. During her three years there, she continued to feel God pushing her to go into mission work; she left teaching and enrolled at Hope College in 1917. Unfortunately, this decision was met with some opposition as it put a burden on the rest of the Holkeboer family, both financially and practically. The tuition bill was hefty and her siblings needed a good education as well. It also put a strain on Anna Holkeboer, who needed her daughter's help in caring for the house and family.

Holkeboer was not to be hindered from getting her degree, however, and she flourished at Hope College, graduating with honors in 1920 after only three years rather than the usual four. Unfortunately, the Christian Reformed Church to which Holkeboer belonged did not have any positions for new missionaries available; however, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) had many open opportunities. Holkeboer accepted a position in China and transferred into the RCA. In September of 1920, just three months after her college graduation, Holkeboer left the United States and began her journey to China.

The first leg of the journey was by ship to Honolulu, Hawaii. Traveling with another woman, Jean Nienhuis, the two

(Continued on page 2)

From the Director



The articles in this issue of the *Quarterly* were written by two of our student archival assistants. Hannah Boehme, a senior, and Amanda Palomino, a sophomore, have quite a talent for research and writing. Boehme processed the Tena Holkeboer archival collection, and Palomino, the Leprosy Federation records, and have provided future researchers with wonderful resources for

20th century Amoy Mission and leprosy mission history. Every semester, I look forward to working with students of this caliber and allowing them to discover the satisfaction that working with primary historical documents can bring them, at any age in their lives.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Tena Holkeboer (continued from page 1)

women waved to friends as the *S.S. Nanking* pulled away from the harbor. Shortly thereafter, the ship began to rock and the women (along with many others) experienced their first bout of seasickness. It was so severe at first that they did not even leave their cabin. After a few days, the sea and their stomachs calmed, and they were able to enjoy the sunshine and breeze on the deck.

Soon enough, Holkeboer was able to establish a routine on the ship: the two women arose promptly at 7 o'clock and had breakfast at 8 o'clock. A prayer meeting followed at 9 o'clock, after which Holkeboer and Nienhuis passed the time by reading or taking a leisurely walk until the midday meal. After lunch, the ladies napped; they dressed for dinner which a more formal affair, again walked on the deck, and then to bed at 10 o'clock. Holkeboer admitted to her mother in a letter that she was afraid that her life on the ship was making her lazy, although she would later be glad of the rest that the voyage had afforded her.

From the very beginning, Holkeboer's life in the city of Amoy (located in the district of Tong-an), China, was a busy one. A language study was her first undertaking, and a necessary one at that; this, accompanied by two sick missionaries and the general process of unpacking and getting settled, set the new missionary into a flurry of activity. Slowly, she began to gain more and more responsibilities at the school where she was stationed. After less than a year in Amoy, Holkeboer was teaching four classes and was entrusted with the morning devotions; however, she was quickly frustrated with her lack of vocabulary, as is quite common when learning a completely new language. She expressed her frustrations with a Chinese saying—"ko'ngboechhut" or "I speak, but it can't

get out!" In time, she became proficient and was praised for her beautiful Chinese. Different biographical sketches of her life lauded her use of educated Chinese and her use of "perfect idiom," while another article in *The Banner* said that she "learned the language of the common folk, and the language of women." Regardless, Holkeboer became fluent in Chinese and was able to reach thousands of Chinese (especially girls) to teach them both academics and about the Gospel.

Throughout the many years in China, Holkeboer was asked at a number of times to take charge of a school as principal; she obliged and took up the position at four different schools, often filling in for missionaries who were away on furlough. One of her largest responsibilities was acting as principal of the Hope Christian High School in Amoy. Before she left on furlough due to World War II, Holkeboer also acted as chairperson of China's Synod Committee on Young People's Work, was a delegate to the Quadrennial Assembly of the Church of Christ in China, was president of the Chinese Women's Board of Missions in South Fukien, and had charge of the Centenary Home-to-Home campaign on a nearby island.



Traveling always proved to be an adventure (sometimes a dangerous one!) for Holkeboer and the other missionaries. She wrote home about one such adventure on October 1, 1923. Holkeboer and a few of her associates had traveled away from Tong-an and were many miles away. The trip away from Tong-an was easy, but the return trip proved to be a challenge. On a Wednesday, the small group saw a large junk (a traditional Chinese ship with square sails, a high stern, and a flat bottom) coming down from Tong-an, and so hired it to take them back on Friday. Friday morning, however, it came to light that they had not hired the junk as they thought, but had hired a much smaller sail boat. The group decided to board the boat anyway and as they pushed away from shore, the waves climbed higher and higher and the small boat was tossed about. Everyone on the boat got quite seasick and most "fed the fishes," as Holkeboer put it.

After sailing for five hours, the band was not even halfway back to Tong-an and soon the tide would turn. It being such a small little boat, it would not have had even the slightest chance in battling both the wind and the tide. The options were few—the group could either spend the night in the small boat and sleep seated, or they could dock at a point that was approximately 15 miles from Tong-an and walk the rest of the way. They chose the latter and were soon on their way. It was only four miles to a chapel they sponsored, so they took a rest and found that some of the group who had been ill a few weeks before could go no further. Holkeboer and a preacher friend set out alone, with the intent that the

rest of the group could find transportation and meet them in Tong-an. Eventually everyone made it to Tong-an relatively unscathed and with a story to tell.

A second adventure that Holkeboer recounted to her friends back in the United States was the stuff of action novels. Between 1941 and 1943, she was forced to take a furlough due to World War II, and when the war ended, getting back into China proved far more difficult than she had anticipated. The seas were still unsafe and Holkeboer decided that she would wait in India until she could return to China. She took a spot in Chittoor, India, at the Beattie School where she remained for two years, teaching English and Bible, all the while waiting for the opportunity to return to Amoy. In 1945, she found a way into Shanghai, which is where the perils truly began.

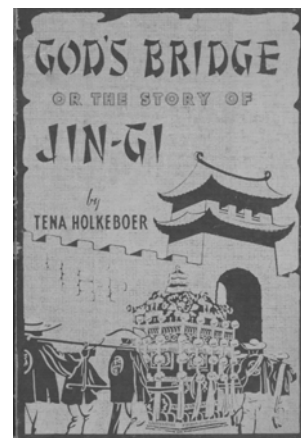
On December 17, Holkeboer received a call from a friend saying that a cargo ship was going to be leaving for Chuanchow in a few hours. (Chuanchow was a town 60 miles from Amoy—there were various ways to get from Chuanchow to Amoy; Holkeboer was not concerned.) She hurriedly packed her things and took a taxi to the cargo ship. She reported that her cabin conditions were far less than desirable and her bunk was just 18 inches wide. The following few days proved to be eventful. Holkeboer wrote:

"The first two days were uneventful, except that the boat was much slower than we had counted on, and it became clear that four days could not possibly bring us to Chuanchow. I had to supply my own food, and I feared that it might not hold out, so began to ration my supplies. On Friday afternoon we had some excitement when there was a cry of 'Fire!' on board. We were taking down many bales of cotton batten. A careless smoker set fire to the bales, and for a half hour things were tense while many fought to bring it under control. That night we ran into a storm, but fortunately it lasted only a few hours. During the night, shots were fired, but I was innocent to their meaning until the next day when my travelling companion informed me that pirate junks had attempted to approach the ship, only to be scared off by the firing. The Chinese government has not gotten the coast patrolled yet, so pirates are springing up everywhere."

The ship was met with another storm the next night and Holkeboer thought shipwreck was inevitable. She found solace in thoughts of Paul, who spoke of being shipwrecked not once, but three times. The crew found a quiet place to anchor for the night and waited out the storm. The dangers were not passed, however, and the next morning pirates came upon the ship again. This time, though, the pirates were tenacious and fired at the cargo ship. There happened to be passengers who served as soldiers, and the head of the soldiers ordered them to fire. Holkeboer said that the bullets flew thick and fast for about 20 minutes; finally, the pirates turned away. As Holkeboer said, "It was a narrow escape." Once the cargo ship anchored, it was a four hour sailboat ride to shore, followed by an hour long rickshaw ride, but

Holkeboer was eventually and joyfully reunited with her beloved community.

It was not only the Chinese that Holkeboer sought to teach, but those back in the United States as well. In 1944, 20 years after arriving in Amoy, China, Holkeboer published a book entitled *God's Bridge or The Story of Jin-gi*. While most of the dialogue and setting details were fictionalized and dramatized, the events were real and the characters acquaintances of Holkeboer's. *God's Bridge* told of the struggles of Jin-gi's



life, particularly those in coming to faith in God and his experience through seminary. Through the publication of this book, Holkeboer hoped to help others to trust in God and inspire their faith further, just as she had been inspired as a girl, reading stories of missionaries' experiences. It was decided that any royalties from the book would go to paying off Jin-gi's educational debts; when those had been fulfilled, the proceeds would go to assuring Jin-gi's children could also take part in formal education. Holkeboer dedicated the book "To my mother and to all mothers who give up their children for the sake of the Kingdom of God"—a heartwarming recognition of the things that her mother had to give up in order for her daughter to follow God's will into the unknown.

Holkeboer was forced out of China during the Communist takeover, but felt that her time as a missionary was not yet finished. The Philippines became her new home and Holkeboer continued to work with the Chinese population in Manila. It was there that she established a second Hope Christian High School; she taught and administrated there for ten years until her retirement in 1960.

One of the most exciting and treasured times for Holkeboer throughout her many years abroad was when the mail steamer arrived with mail. Telephones were in use during her time as a missionary, of course, but cross-continental was rare and not readily available to people like those in the mission field. Holkeboer relied upon mail, then, to keep in contact with her family and friends back in Michigan. Shortly after she arrived in Amoy China, a mail steamer arrived unexpectedly bearing a "big haul" for both her and Nienhuis. "If I count the letters from home as 5, I had 19 letters + 2 Banners + 2 SS. Times, 2 Moody Institute Monthly magazines...+ 2 Holland City News + 2 Instructors + the December Ladies Home Journal." The two women were giddy with their surprise and though they tried to read all of the mail that night, they gave up because of the volume. They went to bed, but were so thrilled, they could not sleep. Again and again throughout her time abroad, Holkeboer wrote of her joy and thankfulness upon receiving mail from home.

Holkeboer also enjoyed getting to know her family better by communicating with them via letters rather than being with them every day. She expressed such a sentiment to her mother a few months after she began her job in China. Her relationship with her brother Oscar blossomed with her physical absence as well. When they lived in the same household, she was often impatient and quickly frustrated with him, but by writing to each other without everyday annoyances, they grew close. In a letter dated March 6, 1921, Holkboer wrote to Oscar, "And I like them [Oscar's letters] best of all when they tell me about yourself, about your real self. Oh, I am so glad that, though there is a vast ocean between us, in reality we have been drawn closer together and have learned to know one another better since I left home. I think I understand you now in a way that was impossible while I was with you."



After thirty years of mission work, educating, and growing relationships, Holkeboer retired. She left as a beloved member of the Chinese community, both in Amoy and Manila. Some old pupils of hers gave her a banner decorated with the words "Kind Teacher, Gentle Mother" in Chinese. That did not mean, however, that she spent her time idly; she often

spoke at conferences and events. She also continued writing and giving her time to others. Sadly, Holkeboer died in November 1965 at the age of 70, but the impact of her mission work has resonated through generations.

Japanese Scholar Visits Archives

Professor Hiroshi Onishi, of Ferris University in Japan, spent two weeks at the Joint Archives of Holland in January. Onishi was here gathering information for a forthcoming publication celebrating the sesquicentennial of Ferris University. While here, he reviewed material on Reformed Church in America missionaries in



Japan and information on Hope graduates who have taught at Ferris High School and/or Ferris University, as well as Ferris High School graduates that attended Hope College.

The Leprosy Federation

by Amanda Palomino

History's way of showing us the big picture often reveals how much one committed group, even a small one, can change the world. Christian ministries and church groups, for example, continue to make undeniably significant contributions and remain active participants in many social justice causes, like combating disease and advancing health and welfare in underdeveloped countries. In Holland, Michigan, we see such a story of unity—a bond formed through a shared passion for making a difference, which ultimately left a great impact—in the records of the Women's Federation for Leprosy.

The conception of the Federation started with Christine Van Raalte Gilmore, a much respected leader among the women of the Holland/Zeeland community. On December 18, 1919, Gilmore invited key women from almost all the churches of the Holland and Zeeland area to her home, where she proposed the formation of a women's coalition of church groups. It was a unique, ecumenical initiative, designed to encourage cooperative community service among local churches through their women's clubs. Nothing of the kind existed in the area for women until this time, and that night, the proposal was unanimously approved, amidst much excitement. Gilmore was elected the first president, and on March 10, 1920, the Federation held their first meeting at Ninth Street



*Christine
Van Raalte Gilmore*

Reformed Church. Approximately four hundred women attended to worship together and confer over the possible service objectives for their organization. Early financial reports show that they initially favored a number of ministries, including the American Bible League and, more locally, the building of the Holland Rescue Mission. Even from the beginning, though, the Federation took a keen interest in the issue of leprosy and, eventually, this became the focus of their patronage.

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is one of the world's oldest diseases. In countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Myanmar, Nepal, and the Philippines, the stigma of the disease inspires such fear and contempt that people with leprosy are often ostracized by their families and friends. Because of their condition, such people are usually unable to care for themselves, facing long years of solitude and slow death.

To combat this tragedy, raising awareness about leprosy and funds to care for people with leprosy became the mission of

the Federation as they worked with the American Leprosy Missions, or ALM. This global Christian organization, which was founded in 1906, continues to work in the countries most affected by leprosy today, providing treatment and comfort for patients, as well as educating and advocating compassion among their communities. The partnership between ALM and the Federation started in 1924, when C. J. Stauffacher, a medical missionary, was recommended by ALM to speak at the Federation's annual meeting on March 12. The ladies had already planned their meeting's schedule when he arrived, but they offered Stauffacher the last ten minutes to speak about his work in Imhambane, East Portuguese, which is now Mozambique. Stauffacher described his experience in the field, caring for people with leprosy, those deserted by their families and kept out of hospitals, suffering from painful, disfigured limbs and malnutrition. His speech made such an impression on the ladies that they arranged for another meeting five days later devoted to hearing him exclusively. At the second meeting, Stauffacher shared his story in even greater depth and told them about his goal in coming to the United States to collect enough money to buy land in Imhambane and build a colony where people with leprosy could live safely and be treated. In that single night, the Federation women raised \$1,015—a phenomenal sum at the time—which enabled Stauffacher to not only buy the land but to build the first treatment center in the colony. For many years afterward, the leprosy colony in Inhambane grew, remaining in operation until the 1970s, when Mozambique experienced a period of turbulence following its independence from Portugal and warfare between right and left political factions.

Even after Stauffacher retired, the Federation continued to partner with ALM, receiving regular updates on developments in leprosy programs and speakers for their meetings. The stories of these speakers, many of them missionaries, encouraged the women of the Federation to continue raising capital to further ALM's work in developing treatment through medical research and distributing them through medical missionaries to underdeveloped countries. Over the years, the Federation focused specifically on three main projects. First was Stauffacher in Imhambane. Following the evacuation of foreign missionaries during Mozambique's civil war, ALM suggested endorsing the Leprosy Hospital in Ganta, Liberia. The Federation's accounts vary as to the exact date, but it can be estimated that the majority of the Federation's fund-raising backed the work in Ganta during much of the 1970s until the late 1980s, when Liberia experienced its first civil war, and foreign missionaries were again forced to leave for their own safety. At that time, ALM gave the Federation a new project, supporting Dr. Kongawi's practice in the DR Congo. There, the Federation continued to champion his outfit's various needs—building materials for housing, motorcycles for delivering medical supplies, among other things—until the Federation's disbandment in 2010.

Through the years, the vision of the Federation was to provide the women of the churches of West Michigan the opportunity to combine their efforts in a cause they all believed in. The Federation was thus organized in a way that reflected the large, diverse community that it created. Leadership rested with the Board of Representatives, headed by the president and included a vice president, secretary, treasurer and auditor, as well as representatives from each member church. There were usually one or two delegates from each church, and these delegates normally served a term of two years on the board. Voting took place at the two yearly Board meetings on the third Monday of January and November when the Board members met to plan their schedule for the coming year.

Besides the Board meetings, the Federation held two other major events—the Annual Prayer and Praise service and the Children's Rally. These took place at the same time and place at the end of March or beginning of April, and every year, a different church sponsored the events, hosting all the members of the Federation, as well as the Sunday school children from every member church. Typically, the Annual Prayer and Praise meeting followed a particular program, featuring music, devotional reading, and a main speaker—often invited from ALM. Also, during this meeting, the Federation would collect the annual deposits from individual member churches, brought in by their representatives. The Children's Rally also collected Sunday school donations and would award prizes to the group that brought in the most. These rallies were a big hit with the local children, featuring skits, stories, and puppet shows centering on the Federation's mission to help those with leprosy. One beloved character who made a regular appearance at these rallies was Pete the Pig. The story of a young boy who raised a pig named Pete and sold him to raise money for the missionaries of ALM inspired the Federation's youngest supporters to do what they could to help, sometimes by collecting loose change in little, cardboard Pete the Pig banks.

In operation for nearly ninety years, the Federation raised over \$350,000 in the fight against leprosy before their meetings came to an end in 2010. This immensely admirable support undoubtedly helped to advance medical research in understanding the causes and developing lasting treatments for leprosy, as well as bringing hope to hundreds of people with leprosy. In an interview with Barbara Vande Waa and Gertrude Van Haitsma, long-time president and secretary of the Federation, Vande Waa summed up the spirit of the Federation as “the common bond when you see a need you can help with.” Indeed, the unity of the women of the Federation serves as a reminder of the power that dedicated people can generate to bring about change in the world. The collection of their meeting records, correspondence with ALM missionaries, photos of the projects in Africa, teaching materials, etc. is now housed in the Joint Archives of Holland—a tribute to how the Federation has served as an engine for change in the fight against leprosy.



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*Missionaries from three missions together in Amoy for a conference, ca. 1935.
Tena Holkeboer is in the third row from the bottom, sixth person from the right.*